

DOING MANAGEMENT AND BUSINESS RESEARCH IN IRISH ORGANISATIONS: REFLECTIONS ON EXPERIENCE

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Introduction

The relationship between ideas/theory, practical 'business and management experiences' and evidence/empirical research is a complex and much disputed issue. This paper through reflection on three different research experiences highlights the problematic and complex nature of doing research in Irish Organisations. Firstly, a theoretical methodological framework is briefly outlined and secondly, practical experiences from three research projects are commented upon within the a priori assumptions underpinning the framework.

An important fundamental issue that needs to be considered is the question as to what is meant by scientific knowledge and truth and how does this differ from common sense knowledge. These issues are keenly debated in the philosophy of science where they are studied in a field known as the theory of knowledge or epistemology. Without scientific research, one person's guess is as good as another's and, as a result, personal opinion rules the day.

This paper acknowledges differences in research orientations/perspectives and suggests that these differences emerge from the interplay between the three core components of the research process. These components are 1) dependency on existing theory, 2) the timing and specification of the research question and 3) the collection and analysis of empirical evidence. The key interplay issue is how sequential, linear or holistic the research process evolves. This in turn is a derivative of the degree of reflexivity between the development of the research question, the collection and analysis of empirical data and how central existing theoretical knowledge is in steering the research process (Brannick and Roche, 1997).

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A Theoretical Methodological Framework

Epistemology and Theoretical Perspective

The philosophy of science has produced useful principles relating to epistemology and ontology which include some basic assumptions that constitute the philosophical underpinnings of theory. This in turn enables us to understand science and differing forms of explanation. Epistemology (the grounds for knowledge) and ontology (the nature of the world) can be assessed along a fairly arbitrary continua moving from a realist to a relativist perspective. A realist ontology assumes that individuals have direct, unmediated access to an external reality which is the real world. A relativist ontology presupposes that individuals do not have direct access to the real world - language, culture and other distortions are interposed. A realist epistemology assumes that it is possible to obtain hard, secure, "objective" knowledge about a single external reality. A relativist position assumes that people's knowledge of the world is highly individual, subjective and difficult to access. Their knowledge is meaningful in its own terms and generalisations and universally valid findings are unattainable.

Today two major traditions exist, the empiricist with a realist ontology and epistemology, and the hermeneutic with relativist ontology and a realist epistemology. The empiricist tradition seeks to explain human action while the hermeneutic tradition seeks to understand human realities. The *empiricist tradition*, sometimes referred to as the deductive-nomological or hypothetico-deductive approach, relies on the covering-law model of science. To explain, is to identify the relevant generalisations which cover the event/case to be explained. A researcher studying a business research topic within this tradition appeals to laws generated by previous research or attempts to formulate new law-like statements on the basis of empirical data. What is crucial is the process by which those ideas are tested. The *understanding or hermeneutic tradition* attempts to understand social reality by interpreting the meanings shared by the social group or held by social actors. A unique meaning cannot be grasped by seeing it as an instance explained by a general or all covering law. The researcher operating within the hermeneutic tradition must attempt to enter the "culture" of the phenomenon under investigation by learning to speak its language and by sharing its vision. This insider view enables the researcher to understand the phenomenon under study as it reveals itself.

The rigidity and precision of the specification of the question and the timing of its delineation whether before or during the data collection phase is determined by the researcher's epistemological perspective.

Research Question

The research problem is the starting point of all research and poses exceedingly difficult intellectual challenges. Research ideas or questions can relate 1) to existing practical business problems where managers (who may also be the researcher) feel that things

may be improved, 2) to public policy related issues or 3) to some theoretical puzzle that needs conceptual clarity for better theory development. The process of developing the research question begins with the identification of the broad research area and this is followed by the formulation or definition of the research question or research problem, as it is sometimes called. This in turn produces a clear statement of the issue/s to be investigated. As already stated the rigidity and detailed nature of the specification of the question and the timing of its delineation whether before or during the data collection phase is determined by the researcher's epistemological perspective. The hermeneutic tradition allows the research question, the conceptual framework and data collection to proceed and develop simultaneously through a process of reflexivity. In a strictly applied hypothetico-deductive approach a theoretical framework and a clearly defined research question are developed prior to the collection of empirical data. Clear visible linkages between the theoretical framework, the research question and the data collection techniques are evident. This leads, inevitably, to an observable distinction between theory and empirical evidence.

The study focus identifies the unit of analysis which can be an individual manager or employee, an organisation, a functional department, an industrial group, a country or an event such as a strategic decision. The unit of analysis is the item which the researcher actually studies and measures. Hence the unit of analysis refers to the basic item underlying whatever level of aggregation that maybe developed from the research data during subsequent analysis. The research design, as well as its potential theoretical significance, is heavily dominated by the way the unit of analysis is defined.

Reflections on Three Research Experiences

As already argued the difference in methodological orientation emerges from the interplay between the three core components of the research process. These components are 1) dependency and reliance on existing theory, 2) the timing and specification of the research question and 3) the collection of empirical evidence. By applying this framework, the three research projects that will be discussed conform, in varying degree, to the hypothetico deductive or empiricist research tradition. The three are 1) a structured analytic survey of management practices, 2) a multiple industry case study and 3) an embedded single case study .

For each research project three elements of the research process are commented upon both interactively and separately. These elements are 1) The What Question - which involves the specification of a management problem and the research question, the unit of analysis, and the role of existing theories and models, 2) The From Whom Question which may incorporate both primary and secondary sources of empirical evidence. Primary data collection methods are devised and controlled by the researcher. Data that is already collected and not devised or controlled by the researcher, such as company records, government statistics or publications or previous surveys or case

studies are examples of secondary data sources. Primary data collection encompasses the unit of information, sample design including size and representativeness, access and co-operation of units. Only one of the three projects, the multiple industry case study, used secondary sources of evidence. 3) The How Question - which covers such issues as primary and secondary data sources, data collection instruments, procedures which encompass pretesting and piloting of instrument, single and multiple sources of evidence and respondents ability to provide relevant and accurate information. The analysis and interpretation question is not addressed.

The research process involved in the three studies can essentially be characterised as a process of 'muddling through' rather than the implementation of a meticulously planned research design. This in no way undervalues the validity and reliability of the research. Rather, it addresses the problem of moving the research agenda forward whilst reconsidering and reformulating the research focus. The manifestation of the 'muddling through' is research project specific.

A Structured Analytic Survey of Management Practices

Introduction

The survey titled "Irish Management Practice in the Changing Marketplace" was designed by a multidisciplinary research team from the Graduate School of Business, University College Dublin.

The What Question

The study focused on business performance and management practices across a broad range of management specialisms including manufacturing, service quality, information technology, marketing and human resources. The specification of the research question evolved from existing developments in the relevant literatures and the research teams considered views and pre understandings. This research sets out to describe management practices and to test empirically various theoretical propositions. The generic all inclusive management practice approach demanded that the research would be carried out by a team drawn from the different management specialist areas.

There are advantages and disadvantages associated with a multidisciplinary team designing and carrying out a research project. Team members from different business specialist areas come from different academic and work experience backgrounds and consequently operate in different 'thought worlds'. Because of differing work and academic experiences the team was a highly technically skilled group with many academic, practitioner and organisational contacts. The clash of 'thought worlds' was a healthy feature of the research process in so far as it demanded of each participant to reflect on the assumptions underpinning their own discipline and their own approach to scientific research. This clarification process was very time consuming and sometimes

it was difficult to reconcile different viewpoints. The most likely outcome, in this type of scenario, was to follow the path of least resistance whereby participants agreed to differ and all the disputed issues were incorporated into the research design. This eventually resulted in a very long and complicated questionnaire design. The questionnaire design took the best part of 12 months to complete.

The biggest practical problem confronted by the team was arranging meetings of 1 to 3 hours duration. Team members had different work commitments and work schedules which varied by semester and by team member.

This ubiquitous personality factor, which is very hard to specify, was also a very important ingredient in the smooth running of the project. This team had never before worked together, the majority of the team did not know one another, and team participation was voluntary. In the end it was a spirit of goodwill and a generosity of spirit by some members, in particular, that facilitated the continuation of the research. Team selection if there is a choice is a very important issue: some people are not good team players.

The From Whom Question - Companies and Individuals

The unit of information was the most senior designated manager/s at establishment level who are responsible for day to day operations management and/or personnel management in commercial establishments.

In order to locate the relevant manger at site level the appropriate sampling unit was the establishment. However there is no such population list available. Hence the actual sample design involved two interconnected stages (see Figure 2 & 4) in order to achieve the sample design outlined in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Sampling Plan		
<i>Population:</i>	Unit	- Commercial Establishments or Plants/Workplaces
	Extent	- All commercial Private and Semi-State Sectors establishments employing more than 20 persons
	Size	- unknown
	Time & Place	- Irish Republic, Spring 1996.
	Element	- Operations Manager, Personnel Manager or Designated Manager (where applicable).
<i>Sampling Frame:</i>	ESRI data base	
<i>Sampling Unit:</i>	Private sector establishments/workplaces/plants	
<i>Sampling Method:</i>	Stratified, Disproportionate probability sample	
<i>Sample Size:</i>	500 establishments	

The selection of a sampling method is based on the cost versus value principle. The ultimate aim is to choose the sampling method that will yield the greatest margin of value over cost. The sampling method used is a disproportionate stratified design. There are two reasons for stratifying a survey population; 1) it helps to ensure representativeness and 2) reduces sampling error. Thus, the required sample size for the same level of sampling error will usually be smaller. Hence, the number selected within each stratum varies according to the amount of variability in each stratum of the stratifying factor. In other words the sample size of each stratum is proportionate to the standard deviation of that stratum. Because variation in management practice tends to be greatest in large companies, company size as measured by number of employees was the stratifying factor and proportionally more large companies were selected (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Actual Company Sample Design, Stage 1		
<i>Population:</i>	Unit	- Commercial Company
	Extent	- All commercial Private and Semi-State Sectors Companies(excluding construction) employing more than 20 persons.
	Size	- 4,050
	Time & Place	- Irish Republic, Spring 1996.
	Element	- Operations Manager, Personnel Manager or Designated Manager (where applicable).
<i>Sampling Frame:</i>	Dun and Bradstreet Company List	
<i>Sampling Unit:</i>	Commercial Company	
<i>Sampling Method:</i>	Stratified, Disproportionate probability sample	
	Company Size	Sampling Fraction
	20-<50 emps	1 in 10
	51-<100 emp	1 in 3
	101-<250 emp	1 in 2
	251-1,000 emp	1 in 2
	1001 plus emp	1 in 2
<i>Sample Size:</i>	1,003	

The ESRI provided the sample list of 1,003 companies which included, company name, address, telephone and fax numbers, sector, industrial grouping and company size. Forty five percent of the companies were in the manufacturing sector and the remainder,

55%, were in the services (transport, distribution financial) sectors. Nearly 20% of the sampled companies employed between 20-49 employees and 10% employed more than 500 persons.

The compilation of a sample listing including both the sample unit (establishment/site/plant) and the unit of information (manager/s responsible for human resource and operations management) was a three phase process. Phase one involved developing a data base of the sampled companies. Firstly, companies outside the parameters of the sample design, construction companies and non commercial public sector organisations (Eas, hospitals, 3rd level institutions) were excluded. Secondly, the number of sites and the name of the chief executive was added to the original information provided by the ESRI. This information was acquired from existing listings (top 500 company listings, Kompass and Dun and Bradstreet) and in a small number of cases by telephoning the company. For approximately 61% of firms the company and the establishment are synonymous. Individual plants of manufacturing firms are listed separately in the company listing but individual sites for both services and retail sectors, such as bank branches are not included. Hence, the multi site issue is central to the services sector which includes financial service, transport and distribution companies.

Table 1

	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>One site/plant/branch</i>	613	61
<i>Two-Four Sites</i>	262	26
<i>Five - Ten Sites</i>	67	7
<i>Eleven + sites</i>	52	5
<i>Companies Outside Sample Parameters</i>	9	1
Total	1,003	

The CEO of the Graduate Business School wrote to each chief executive/managing director explaining the nature and importance of the research and requesting their support. After receiving the CEO letter a small number of companies informed us that it was company policy not to participate in any research project. These companies were then excluded from the data base.

Phase two involved contacting by telephone each company and requesting the name and title of the manager responsible for operations and human resource management. At this stage the name and address of the company was also checked. This information needed to be correct before a questionnaire could be mailed. Incorrect telephone numbers or numbers that on a consistent basis did not reply were checked with directory of enquires.

Many difficulties, as outlined below, emerged regarding the sample listing.

1. Duplicate entries,
2. Business no longer operating,
3. Taken over by or merged with another company,
4. Change of name,
5. Change of address
6. In large companies sector identification was problematic. Many different within company business units including financial services and manufacturing units were separately listed, using the same company name and telephone number, in the company population listing ..

Many different management titles emerged as can be seen from Figures 3.1 & 3.2.

In a significant number of establishments the same named manager was responsible for both functional tasks.

Figure 3.1 Management Titles: Single Respondent Establishments



Management Title	Frequency
Managing Director	10
General Manager	8
Production Manager	7
Operations Manager	6
Plant Manager	5
Factory Manager	4
Company Secretary	3
Financial Controller	2

Figure 3.2: Management Titles: Two Respondent Establishments

<i>Human Resource Function</i>	<i>Operations Function</i>
Human Resources Manager	Production Manager
Personnel Manager	Production and Quality Manager
Personnel Officer	Operations Manager
Training Manager	Plant Manager
Recruitment Officer	Managing Director
General Manager	Quality Manager
Commercial Manager	Chief Executive
Managing Director	General Manager
Director	Warehouse Manager
Administration Manager	Sales Director
Vice President	IT Manager
Chief Executive	Plant Engineer
Financial Controller	Factory Manager
Accountant	Works Manager
Credit Controller	Marketing Manager
Secretary	Service Manager
Technical Manager	Stores Manager
Customer & Technical Operations Manager	Sales Manager
Manufacturing Systems Manager	Distribution Manager
Sales Manager	
Personnel and Marketing Manager	

At the end of phase two, three mailing lists had been compiled for the single site companies.

Table 2: Constitution of Mailing Lists

	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>Single respondent companies</i>	285	28
<i>Two respondent companies</i>	521	52
<i>Multi Site companies (4 plus sites)</i>	77	8
<i>Excluded from Data base</i>	123	12
Total	1003	100

Phase three involved designing a sample plan for establishments from multi site sampled companies. A separate data base containing company name, address, and telephone number for selected establishments was compiled. The sample for multi site companies included the headquarters and at least one plant/establishment site. The number of sites selected was determined by the size of company establishment population and by applying a 1 in 10 sampling fraction (see Figure 4). The number of establishments/sites selected was consistently rounded upwards, in other words a company with 4 - 10 sites resulted in one sample site while a company with between 11 - 20 sites produced two sample sites.

The day to day site manager was considered the operations manager at establishment level for the services sector. The selected establishments were telephoned and the name and title of the site manager was obtained. Some of these sites were small with a very simple operation such as a collection depot for grain or milk or an agency address. These type of sites/plants were not appropriate for a management practices questionnaire and were excluded.

The human resource manager at establishment level was more difficult to identify. They could be located at regional level, as is the case in the financial sector, or at headquarters or site level. This led to a situation where the one manager would have to fill out more than one questionnaire. The headquarters were contacted by a research assistant or by one of the academic team who had a contact.

Figure 4: Actual Sample Design, Stage 2 Establishments

<i>Population:</i>	Unit	- Commercial Establishment/Workplace/Plant
	Extent	- Multi Site commercial Private and Semi-State Sector Companies identified from Stage one; 77 in total
	Size	- 1,400 approx
	Time & Place	- Irish Republic, Spring 1996.
	Element	- Operations Manager, Personnel Manager or Designated Manager (where applicable).
<i>Sampling Frame:</i>	Telephone Listings Yellow Pages, Business and Finance, Kompass	
<i>Sampling Unit:</i>	Commercial Site (plant, workplace, establishment)	
<i>Sampling Method:</i>	Stratified, systematic proportionate probability sample	
	Company	Sampling Fraction
	Telephone List	1 in 10
<i>Sample Size:</i>	210	

Response Rates

Irish companies may have reached saturation point. Excluding under-graduate and pre experience post graduate students the biggest problem comes from other government agencies, representative bodies like IBEC, marketing research agencies, European agencies and other academic institutions. At this moment in time many organisations have 5 large questionnaires waiting for completion. In 1996, according to ISME, Irish SME companies were requested by government agencies to answer 200,000 questions.

Personal contact by professional interviewer and/or by academic researcher was used very successfully to increase the response rate. Ex or current post experience MBA students and past MBS students were very useful company contacts. Interest in the research was encouraged by publicising the research at personnel conferences, writing brief articles for marketing and human resource practitioner magazine and business sections of daily newspapers.

The How Question - Data Collection Instruments and Procedure.

Designing a structured questionnaire is very time consuming. Question content, question wording and the question sequence are of crucial importance in the development of a standardised structured instrument.

The questionnaire design for operations management practices was very complex because both services and manufacturing companies were included. After pretesting and piloting the questionnaire it emerged that the sheer size of almost 30 pages and the complexity involving many sections applicable in only certain circumstances was an awesome experience and would have to be changed. It also emerged from the pilot study and in consultation with the ESRI that because the questionnaire was highly structured and the time pressures on managers (unable to commit to a specified time) that a self completion type survey was considered a more feasible data collection approach. The simplification and the reduction of the questionnaire necessitated its subdivision into three separate questionnaires one for services firms and two for manufacturing firms, one for supplier companies and one for buyer companies.

The design for the human resource questionnaire was simpler as the same questions were appropriate for different types and sizes of establishments. However it was also a long questionnaire.

One single questionnaire was sent to companies where one person was responsible for both set of tasks. This was most likely to occur in small companies. The one questionnaire was produced by amalgamating and reducing the existing two (HRM and Operations) and this ensured a large degree of standardisation across single and multiple responding organisations. This high degree of standardisation allows for the development of a single data file which in turn will simplify data analysis at a subsequent stage.

A Multiple Industry Case Study; Porter's industry competitiveness model

Introduction

This research set out to test, in an Irish context, Porter's proposition that the sources of competitiveness in an industry could be explained by the existence in the home country of a 'Diamond'. This diamond manifests itself in extensive clustering. It is a widely publicised model adopted by Irish policy makers and management consultants. However it had not been tested empirically. In order to test the explanatory usefulness of the model the project examined three industrial groupings. Each industry group had its own research team.

The specification of the research question was a collaborative effort of all three industry teams. The customised research design for each industry was the responsibility of one designated research team. The reflections presented in this paper pertain to one group and only one industry. This industry is very well documented and initially this was very advantageous. However an over researched industry with only a small number of key firms did present some challenges and problems. The two major challenges are 1) It makes it more difficult to sell the idea to potential firms and interviewees and 2) it is difficult to add to existing knowledge, especially if research reports are considered as an alternative to action.

The What Question

The model is a wide ranging explanation of competitiveness and its specific focus is on the home country. It encompasses demand, related industries, strategies and structure, factor conditions, government and chance. The model was poorly specified in all previous research and thus specification of the model was extremely time consuming.

The model's origin is in the US and larger countries and it was almost counter-intuitive to use the unaltered model in a small open economy, such as Ireland. Thus we expended a lot of effort in reviewing other theories. However in the end we felt it was necessary to stay within Porter's paradigm and in our research address the perceived shortcomings.

Even though all interested parties wanted practical outcomes the project was heavily theory laden. In particular the companies were not interested in whether the model worked per se. An appreciation of this very old conflict between theoretical significance and practical relevance was important both for gaining access to companies and securing co-operation from interviewees.

It was important to recognise the twin pressures early in the research because the two must exist in tandem rather than allowing one or the other to dominate. A key lesson is to decide the final research question in consultation with both the literature and with industry personnel.

For this project it was vital to construct a 'Logic' document. This should evolve

from the literature review to represent a map or track record of all thoughts and decisions taken. This document was a record of which questions were dropped and why and which questions were altered and why.

The From Whom Question - Companies and Individuals

Primary data collection encompasses the unit of information, sample design including size and representativeness, access and co-operation of units. The unit of information was the company CEO and a senior manager designated by the CEO.

Sample Design

Fifteen companies were selected as the target population on the basis that they represented almost 95% of industry sales. Six of the companies were large multinationals and 9 were small to medium sized enterprises.

Gaining Access

All companies were contacted using a standard letter from the authority that commissioned the study. The letter, addressed to the CEO, outlined the nature and purpose of the study, emphasising the project's role in policy development. The letter highlighted that the group comprised members from three institutions.

A member from the group contacted the company to arrange an interview with the CEO or similarly positioned person. We also pointed out that there were a number of issues that someone at plant/operational level could address, thereby saving the CEO's time. We faxed a 2 page outline of the main questions for discussion to all companies. At this stage many companies requested further details. The fact that we had the semi structured 'questionnaire' ready before we spoke the companies was a benefit. Overall fax proved more effective than the post.

In most cases we spoke to the CEO. We found that, especially in the larger companies, the CEO views were quite subjective and we often had the feeling of "where did we read that". It is a small industry and views seemed quite polarised. This can be an obstacle to development of clear insights into the mechanics of the industry.

It is a good strategy to try to get the CEO's attention or if you like permission and interview the person to whom they delegate the task. The responses were often less 'political' and the interviewees more willing to defend their arguments.

Appointments

It is difficult to force your calendar on someone else. However take the initiative, especially if it has travel implications. In those circumstances the companies were accommodating. It is important to consider the busy times for the industry and holiday periods, such as August, as these are not good times to try to interview people. The best

time for the interview was 10.30 am because managers frequently agreed to a two hour interview which usually went on for two and a half hours and often continued through and during lunch.

Response Rates

At the initial contact stage our aim was to avoid a definite no. In total we had three refusals. In one case we received an outright no. In other situations, if we sensed a hesitation we used an alternative route, for example a personal contact. This strategy definitely worked in 2 companies that would otherwise have said no. An interesting observation was with a company that initially expressed a lack of interest and later agreed after we used a contact. They told us at the interview that it was their strategy to express lack of interest and if the researcher was "good" he/she would find a way to persuade them! So if at first you don't succeed. In the end two companies refused, for confidentiality and security reasons. In line with standard research practice the research group guaranteed confidentiality to each participating company. However this became extremely difficult to maintain when writing a report based on 12 companies. At this point it was very important to distinguish between what is already in the public domain and what is confidential.

The How Question - Data Collection Instruments and Procedure.

This study used both primary and secondary sources of research evidence. Secondary information continuously informed the research strategy. It formed an integral component from design stage right through the subsequent analysis. Official international trade statistics were used to select the cases. An interesting feature of these statistics was the need for care in using them, particularly it was important to examine definitions and classifications and consultation with industry is suggested before making final decisions based on such data. In developing our understanding of the industry and refining our research questions we considered a large number of reports, including masters and doctoral thesis, reports by government departments and other agencies and stockbroker analyses. These sources provided valuable information but it was important to attempt to identify rhetoric and political themes in these reports. These sources formed the backdrop for the research and in particular allowed focused discussions with 'key informants'.

Throughout the research we employed a range of national and international statistics. A number were official statistics while others were industry or sectorial statistical publications. An important exercise involved cross checking the various sources. It was interesting that none of the sources were free from 'error'. However the process of clarifying the anomalies while time consuming often proved very insightful. A number of agencies and government departments, such as IBEC, ESRI, Forfas, Forbairt, Teagasc provided valuable information and reports. A useful lesson was that

many had further information either in an unpublished form or a form more useful for our analysis. Also it was very valuable to discuss the research problem with the individuals that had produced the original information.

The Internet provided information on similar studies ongoing or completed in other international institutes, for example knowledge of the Dutch Porter study was acquired in this way. Finally it proved useful to think more broadly about possible sources of information, for example our understanding of technical aspects of the industry was greatly improved by consultation with a handbook produced by an equipment supplier. This saved valuable time in interviews with industry.

We were fortunate not to incur any expense in acquiring any of the reports or statistics.

The primary data collection approach involved designing two questionnaires. Firstly a semi structured questionnaire, with open ended questions, was used for CEO level interviews. Secondly a structured questionnaire with very specific closed questions was to be completed by a plant level manager. The structured questionnaire was left behind with the CEO and he got a named person to complete and return it. This procedure worked quite well. The only reservation is that it does create substantial extra work. It means answering queries and follow up calls. If possible stay behind and complete the questionnaire on the day.

Taped recorded interviews

The three research team members were present at the semi structured interview with the CEO. It therefore proved important that each team member had clear responsibilities; for particular sections of the questionnaire. What questions to lead on, to probe and to explain where necessary.

The interviews were taped and where possible notes were also taken. A tape recording of an interview provides an excellent record but the taking of notes provides what could be described as first order interpretation and it speeds up the analysis. Note taking is also useful in the interview as it helps the interviewer to concentrate while also giving the interviewee a chance to think and reflect.

Interviewing

Introduce the topic and allow the interviewee to respond even if you are getting information that you do not want or what could be described as political rhetoric. Too much standardised structure accompanied by a very direct style of interviewing appeared to influence how the interviewee responds. Lists such as possible categories were avoided unless they were very specific as interviewees tended to try to refer to all the options. Questions that applied to both the company and the industry tended to be answered in an identical manner. The interviewee rarely provided a justification for their viewpoint. But their view was the reality that the research was trying to comprehend and to understand.

An Embedded Single Case Study; Managing Business to Business Relationships

Introduction

The traditional marketing approach to research can be described as a process of identifying a suitable management problem of interest to the researcher, translating this management problem into a research question, deciding on the data collection techniques, measurement instrument and sample design. While the process is recognised as an iterative one, where one decision substantially influences the other, there are a number of unstated and intangible dimensions to the process and practice of research that cannot be planned for. Indeed, it is the unplanned and ad hoc way that situations and opportunities arise that conditions our approach to research practice. This uncertainty has profound influence on the variety of decisions that have to be made in any research project. This review is an attempt to describe and reflect on the many such decisions encountered on the research journey as the researcher moved through the research agenda constantly struggling back and forward in an attempt to deal with the uncertainties, various problems, barriers and constraints as they arose in practice.

The principle objective of this research was an attempt to understand how firms manage their business to business relationships. This research question, however, was far removed from the original area of interest, but can be traced back and linked to earlier thinking, supporting the contention that the research process can best be defined as decisions in adhocery.

The What Question

The original focus of this research study centred on the internationalisation of small to medium sized Irish firms. A typical management problem facing many small to medium sized Irish firms is how to internationalise. Indeed, the motivation to internationalise brings into relief numerous challenges for firms. One of the frustrating aspects of the early stage of the research process was the volume and range of interesting research ideas that emerged. On the surface each and everyone of these ideas looked interesting, and worthwhile. At this stage of the research, however, the task of narrowing down the choice of topic was simply a pragmatic one based primarily on the realisation that firms continuously faced this internationalisation decision and therefore, a thorough understanding of the process was an essential prerequisite for any academic interested in the area of international marketing.

The task of converting this management problem into a precise research question was relatively straight forward. Specifically, the research question became an investigation of how firms entered international markets. The research focus was firmly based on how the entry decision was made, from the perspective of the firm. Accordingly, the firm as the unit of analysis.

The formulation of the main research question, the development of a theoretical understanding of the phenomenon and research design considerations were considered concurrently. A variety of perspectives and experiences were reviewed and evaluated. It became obvious to the researcher from talking to business executives, reading the literature and attending academic conferences that the traditional approaches and beliefs concerning the entry decision were being critically re-evaluated. In the light of new European research a number of preconceived notions about how firms co-ordinate their business activities were being challenged. While engaging in this process a number of uncertainties came sharply into focus which were subsequently to dramatically alter, not only the research question, but the unit of analysis and the whole approach to the research methodology.

In tandem to the formulation of the research question, equal consideration was being given to the type and number of firms to study and issues of access both to the firm itself and to specific individuals. In doing so, a number of problems arose. A major criticism in the literature about this type of research focused on research design considerations. In particular, whether to focus on a single industry or across multiple industries. Models of internationalisation were, often mistakenly, severely criticised for their lack of generalisability, mainly because they were based on a few case studies. In addition, the definition of small to medium sized firms was an added complication, because there seems to be wide variation from country to country on what constitutes small to medium. The precise ownership of firms also proved difficult. Given the nature of joint ventures, acquisitions and other forms of strategic alliances in the global market of international business, it can be quite difficult to decide company ownership and country of origin.

The original research question was firmly based on the entry decision facing small to medium sized firms as they attempt to internationalise. The final research question ended up as - how do firms establish, develop and maintain relationships with one another. The transition came about in a rather unplanned and circuitous way. While developing a theoretical understanding for the original research question many conflicting views, understandings and interpretations emerged. One such alternative view subscribed to the hypothesis that when firms enter new international markets, the entry decision could be explained as the outcome of a network of relationships that the firm had built up over time and not the result of some independent decision taken by the firm itself. Evidence to support this hypothesis was coming from new empirical European research which took its provenance not from the traditional American transaction costs economic perspective but from other areas of social science, namely, the network perspective. This research perspective contends that it is the network of relationships between firms that enables them to grow and survive. The entry decision according to this perspective was the outcome of relationships built up over time by the firm. The change in research direction from the entry decision question to the study of relationships between firms resulted as a direct consequence of muddling through and looking at the management

problem from a variety of perspectives. It is this constant search for ways to probe and get an understanding of the phenomenon that brings into play opportunities and situations that cannot be envisaged or planned for but yet reflect the uncertainty of the research process in practice. Denying this uncertainty means sticking to a rigid approach to the practice of research. Recognising this uncertainty allows serendipity to play its part.

The change in the research question moved the focus of the study, specifically the unit of analysis, away from the firm to the network of relationships between firms. As a result, a major decision had to be made between taking a dyadic approach to the study of inter firm relationships in contrast to a network of relationships approach. Irrespective of whether the unit of analysis was a firm or a business relationship a case study research strategy, using multiple sources of evidence, was the most appropriate approach. However, given the interdependency, connectedness and web like nature of business relationships, the implications for research strategy were enormous. The implications of such a research strategy and other considerations in researching dyadic relationships brings us to consider the thorny issues of the from whom question.

The From Whom Question - Companies and Individuals

Theoretical Sampling - Selection of Research Sites

Sampling and coverage issues take into consideration not only the research site or company but also the individual respondents therein. Indeed, gaining access to organisations can be frontiers for which we possess no passports. Overcoming the access problem did contribute to the development of the research focus.

The research focus using a dyadic approach to the study of inter firm relationships necessitated the co-operation of a sample of both supplying and buying firms. The key informants were the marketing and purchasing executives responsible for handling inter company relationships. However, these executives are not the only parties to the management of business to business relationships. Indeed, executives from production, engineering, quality assurance/quality control, logistics and finance are deeply involved in the day to day interactions between companies. As a result, it was felt it would be important to illicit their views.

The choice of relationships to be studied was determined by variations within those factors which influence buyer-seller interaction. This study concentrated on variations and differences in two important areas: production technology and on the products that are exchanged. Variations in these two factors was therefore, likely to be obtained by choosing observations corresponding to the cells in the matrix below.

Figure 5: Matrix of supplier product technology and buyer production technology

		<i>Buyer's Production Technology</i>		
		<i>Unit Production</i>	<i>Batch and Mass Production</i>	<i>Process Manufacture</i>
<i>Supplier's Product Technology</i>	Raw & Processed Materials	1	2	3
	Components & Parts	4	5	6
	Equipment	7	8	9

Cell 6 was redundant as components do not form part of process manufacturing. The total number of relationships to be studied was eight and this amounted to sixteen companies.

Armed with the above sampling plan the researcher set off to identify and to gain access to companies corresponding to the cells in the matrix. Two key approaches were used: individuals in key organisations were approached and their help was sought and direct contact was made with business executives.

Identifying and Contacting Research Sites

Two key organisations played a significant role in gaining access to companies, namely, The Marketing Institute and The Institute for Purchasing and Materials Management. Both these Institutions were happy to write on the researcher's behalf to specific member companies explaining what the research was about and encouraging them to co-operate. The researcher as a member of The Marketing Institute set up a business to business forum to deal with relationship marketing issues in a business to business context. It was envisaged that this forum would provide access to companies interested in relationship management issues. Companies were made aware of the initiative through The Marketing Institute MIINEWS magazine. As the forum is still in its infancy only a limited amount of company contacts have happened to date. However, the initiative paid off in other important ways, as funding for the project was provided by the Institute. Likewise, the Institute of Purchasing and Materials Management were instrumental in gaining the co-operation of the companies who won the Supplier of the Year Award for the past ten years. Research funding was also made available by this Institute. Institutional support of this nature lends extra credibility and smoothes the way forward. This type of co-operation and contribution are considered vital to the success of any research project and are playing a major part in the success of this current research study.

Besides the above approaches, direct contact was also made to many companies. This was made possible as the researcher is the Director of Executive Education in the Graduate School of Business, University College Dublin. By making executives of these programmes aware of the research study a number of contacts were made with interested companies. Indeed, one such contact with one of these companies was instrumental in determining the direction of the research.

Level of Access

The level of access in a number of companies proved inadequate to capture to any substantial depth the interdependency and connectedness of business relationships. Many of the individuals who agreed to be interviewed were either Senior Managers or the Managing Directors. In most cases these individuals were not the key respondents responsible for the day to day management of the business relationships. It was not always possible to bypass these respondents and get to the individuals who were directly involved in handling the business relationships. These respondents felt there was no need to talk to anybody else in the company. As far as they were concerned they were the best person to give the necessary company position. Indeed, in many cases it felt like one was getting the party line instead of any real insights.

Meanwhile, the rhetoric flowed and company histories were expounded in great detail. So much so that the interviewer often felt as if the history of the company was being rewritten to fit neat explanations and to leave out the bumpy bits. It often seemed in hindsight a version of the old biographer's problem: even when people are telling their life stories, they are invariably improving on the facts, rewriting their tales, or just plain making them up. In the end it was the experience of these interviews that convinced the researcher that the more central characteristics of the phenomenon were not been adequately addressed by a multiple case study approach. Given the interdependency and connectedness of business relationships, it was evident that a single embedded case study research strategy was the most appropriate route to follow because multiple sources of evidence were required in order to get any real insights into the management of these relationships.

Fortuitously, after gaining limited access to a number of companies, one company emerged where the level of access made it possible to conduct a single in-depth case study research strategy. However, it is interesting to note that throughout the data collection phase there was always uncertainty with the level and degree of access. While it was agreed by the contact person in the company that multiple sources of evidence would be forthcoming, there was always uncertainty as to when the plug might be pulled.

The contact person in the company made the introductions to colleagues in other departments and the researcher explained the essence of the research study. Interviews were conducted with executives from marketing, purchasing, production, engineering, quality assurance/quality control, logistics, distribution and finance. Using an

unstructured interview approach 15 executives, at various levels in the company, who interact either directly or indirectly with suppliers were interviewed. Furthermore, the Purchasing Manager directly responsible for managing the suppliers wrote on behalf of the researcher to each supplier explaining the research study and inviting them to co-operate in the strictest of confidence. Every supplier agreed to cooperate. Initially they seemed a little reticent until they were assured that the researcher was not working on behalf of the buyer. Once they were confident of the above they opened up and shared key insights from their perspective. Aspect of these insights were such that it would not be in their interest if the buyer was aware of them.

Arranging Appointments

Attempting to arrange suitable appointments turned out to be a more difficult task than expected. The researcher learned at an earlier stage that a certain degree of urgency was needed in arranging interviews or else interviews dates drifted far into the future, to be forgotten and sometimes cancelled at the last minute. It was not unusual for the researcher to arrive at a company destination miles away to find the contact person gone or at a meeting, only to be told that "we informed your office this morning of the change in plan". Perhaps all researchers should in future equip themselves with mobile phones and thus prevent needless journeys.

Location of Interviews

The location of the interviews is an important consideration. Holding the interview in the premises of the respondent runs the risk of interruptions and distractions, however, it does save them time and effort. Alternatively, holding the interviews in your premises gives you more control, but it can be difficult to organise as it requires more commitment on the part of the respondent. This researcher experimented with early morning and late evening appointments, including breakfast, lunch and dinner arrangements as well as normal day time appointments. Some of these arrangements, however, did not work out as it proved impossible to record the interviews because of the noise level in hotels, restaurants and pubs. On some of these occasions the respondent brought along other colleagues, and this situation invariably was less effective than individual personal interviews. The key to success is to ensure that your diary is clear and that you are willing to facilitate respondents at any time of the day or evening. It is important to write to confirm the appointment and to again write after the interview thanking them for their co-operation.

Length of Interviews

Most interviews went on longer than the agreed time. This research study recorded interviews between one and two hours duration, however, this researcher always stopped at the agreed time and left it up to the respondent to commit more time and

continue. In the majority of cases the respondents continued when they had no prearranged appointments.

The How Question - Data Collection Instruments and Procedure

A detailed examination of the conceptual framework of the development effects of business relationships and the nature of the research problem indicated that no standardised questionnaire would sufficiently capture the interdependency and connectedness of business relationships. Consequently, it was felt that in-depth personal interviews of key informants would be the most appropriate way to proceed.

It was important to take such an approach because no one set of standardised questions would be appropriate for all the different types of respondents. There was some common themes in order to illicit comparative, compatible understandings. The process typically began by asking the respondent to describe their role in the company with specific reference to their responsibilities. This question tended to go on a bit long and ate into the agreed interview time, but it was felt necessary to allow the respondent to relax by talking about aspects of their jobs they could easily address. It also allowed the researcher at a later stage to return to points raised.

Tape recorded interviews

All interviews were recorded with a tape recorder. None of the respondents objected to the use of tape recording. Respondents were assured of complete confidentiality and the use of the tape recorder was explained as a device to enable the researcher to listen and concentrate on what the respondent was saying. In addition, the researcher explained that after listening to the tapes and reflecting on the material that there might be a need for some clarification on some points. Ostensibly, the tape recorded was used as a device to regain future access if needed. This process has worked well and further contacts are currently happening. Finally, it is very important to have the recorder ready as any flustering with the machine can be very distracting and off-putting for the respondent.

Summary Key Lessons

The What Question

The translation of a management problem into a research question and the specification and elaboration of the research question is a muddling through type process. In practice the research process is uncertain and embodies a constant search of new ways to probe and get an understanding of a phenomena. Recognising this uncertainty allows serendipity to play its part.

Multidisciplinary Research Team facilitates a multi faceted approach to the research focus but this can be a barrier to achieving efficiently a common research focus.

Strong project management is necessary in handling conflict in a cross functional

team. A continuous focus on the research objectives and little indwelling on past conflicts or disagreements is a good strategy.

Public Policy Oriented Research is a collaborative effort between the Commissioning agency, the researchers and the participating companies.

Topic overload can easily occur in a small industrial economy where the same companies are continuously investigated using the same methodology, theoretical models and frameworks.

The relevant contribution that fieldwork experiences, existing research and the researchers own mature reflections make to the development of the research focus should be recorded in a logic document.

The From whom Question

Job title is a poor indicator of job tasks and responsibilities and tends to reflect organisation structure and size.

There was some evidence of a culture of secrecy in that some companies were not willing to give information. Their way of doing things and company information is perceived as their competitive advantage.

Many Irish based firms have reached saturation point because too many surveys are being conducted simultaneously by many different agencies.

Stylish packaging and presentation (colour code) is very important when distinguishing one questionnaire from other or from student research.

Probability statistical sampling is very problematic and can be very expensive because of the non availability of adequate company or establishment listings.

An over researched industry with only a small number of key firms does present some extra access challenges. The two major challenges are 1) it makes it more difficult to sell the research idea to potential firms and interviewees and 2) research reports, particularly in the public policy area, are perceived as an alternative to action.

An appreciation of the very old, if sometimes imaginary, conflict between theoretical significance and practical relevance is important both for gaining access to companies and securing co-operation from interviewees. Company personnel tend to be very busy people.

Confidentiality is a very complex issue when researching a small identifiable population base. Here it is very important to distinguish between what is already in the public domain and what is confidential.

Personal direct contact appears to be the only way to secure good access and consequently to ensure a good response rate.

Feedback, such as a summary report, to participating companies tends to stimulate response rates.

Hierarchical organisational structures tend to produce gate keepers who often decide to be the provider of the information and prevent access to a more relevant person.

In some organisations there are designated personnel who respond to all information queries even though they have little or no direct contact with the specialist activities being researched.

Sponsorship and endorsement by business and professional associations, such as the Marketing Institute, is very useful when trying to identify and gain access to specific companies.

Secondary sources of data need to be checked for accuracy and reliability. Great care need to be taken when using official international trade statistics, particularly it is important to examine definitions and classifications and consultation with industry is suggested before making final decisions based on such data.

The How Question

It is very acceptable to tape in-depth unstructured interviews.

Structured questionnaires and research instruments need to be carefully pretested and piloted.

The nature of the research topic (such as best practice, performance measures and competitive advantage) may give rise to a learned rhetoric, normative responses or aspirational type answering.

Accuracy of information and honesty of responses may be inhibited by responding managers unwillingness to answer question relating to actions taken by their firm.

References

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